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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of sex upon the perception, evaluation and reciprocation of self-disclosing behavior. Subjects were 68 Rutgers University undergraduates who responded to a written statement attributed to either a male or female. The statements varied according to level of intimacy; some disclosed intimate information, while others were superficial. Superficial disclosure elicited more disclosure from subjects. Intimate disclosure was perceived as negative, unhealthy, and feminine. The female speaker was seen as fairer, but the male aroused more emotion. Other sex differences were noted and briefly discussed, with the suggestion that further research should explore the effects of nonverbal behavior on self disclosure. (Author/PPS)

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Sex Roles and and the Perception of Self-disclosing Behavior.

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(1) Title of Paper: Sex roles and the perception of self-disclosing behavior

(2) Major Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of sex upon the perception, evaluation and reciprocation of self-disclosing behavior. Specifically the study addressed the following questions: (1) Do the sex of discloser and sex of respondent affect the evaluation of high-versus low-intimacy self-disclosing behavior? (2) Do sex of discloser and sex of respondent affect the evaluation of the personal characteristics of the discloser in high-versus low-intimacy conditions. (3) Is sex a factor in subjects' feelings about a high-versus a low-disclosing person? and (4) Is sex a factor in the process of reciprocating self-disclosure?

(3) Subjects:

Subjects were 68 undergraduates in two psychology classes at Rutgers University. The students were given extra credit toward their final grade for completing the experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

(4) Procedure:

Stimulus Materials

Two written self-disclosing statements of comparable length were prepared. Six of the 14 sentences in both descriptions were identical and disclosed only superficial personal information. Differences between the remaining eight sentences on the two descriptions constituted the intimacy manipulation. In the low-disclosing condition the eight sentences included more superficial information while these sentences in the high-disclosing condition revealed very intimate information, specifically past failures and present fears of inadequacy.

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Materials were prepared such that the statement was attributed to "Robert" for half the subjects and to "Sharon" for the other half. Thus the four disclosure stimuli were: Male speaker-intimate disclosure, male speaker-conventional disclosure, female speaker-initimate disclosure, and female speaker-conventional disclosure.

Data Collection

Each subject was given one disclosure stimulus, told only to read the directions and complete every page. All work was anonymous.

Dependent Measures

After reading the stimulus statement subjects were instructed (in writing) to write their response to Sharon (Robert) as if they were actually engaged in a conversation. These responses were scored using Rubin's (1975) scale for assessing self-disclosure. The scale has five points: (1) Little or no disclosure (2) superficial disclosure (3) conventional disclosure (4) personal disclosure and (5) intimate disclosure.

Perception and evaluation of the self-disclosing behavior was assessed using four Semantic Differentials. Subjects were asked to rate Sharon's (Robert's) Behavior, Sharon's (Robert's) Personality, Your feelings toward Sharon (Robert), and Sharon's (Robert's) Probable performance as a teacher.

Several final items served as checks on the manipulation and credibility of the stimulus materials.

(5) Results:

Check on Manipulation

Responses to the item asking subjects to indicate how intimate and revealing Sharon's (Robert's) behavior was were subjected to a factorial analysis of variance. A main effect for level of disclosure was found, $F(1,51) = 13.97$, $p < .0008$. The high disclosure

condition was given a mean rating of 3.66, while the low disclosure condition received a mean rating of 1.56. The disclosure manipulation was considered effective.

Perception and Evaluation of Disclosing Behavior

For each of the four Semantic Differentials, in order to investigate communality among items, individual scores on each item were subjected to factor analysis. The 34 original items were incorporated into 10 indices based upon the results of these factor analyses. The 10 indices were then subjected to a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance (Speaker Sex x Subject Sex x Disclosure Level x Class).

A main effect for level of self-disclosure was found on Index 1 - Evaluation of the Behavior, $F(1,51) = 6.42$, $p < .014$. High self-disclosing behavior was seen as less effective, appropriate, attractive, good, etc. A second main effect for level of self-disclosure was found on Index 4 - Mental Health of the Speaker, $F(1,51) = 29.97$, $p < .0001$. The more disclosing person was seen as less mature, stable, well adjusted, rational, etc.

Significant main effects and interactions were found for speaker sex and subject sex on several indices. A significant Disclosure Level x Speaker Sex interaction, $F(1,51) = 4.31$, $p < .04$, was found on Index 2 - Masculinity/Feminity. When disclosure was high the behavior was seen slightly feminine for both male and female speakers. But when disclosure was low the behavior was seen as feminine when the speaker was female and masculine when the speaker was male.

Second, speaker sex interacted with subject sex on Index 5 - Altruism, $F(1,51) = 5.04$, $p < .027$, such that the male speaker was seen as equally open and unselfish by both the male and female subjects, but the female speaker was seen as more open and unselfish

by the male subjects than by the female subjects.

Finally, two main effects were found for speaker sex. The male speaker generated more emotional response than the female speaker. (Index 8, $F[1,51] = 4.80$, $p < .03$). The female speaker was seen as a potentially fairer and kinder teacher (Index 10, $F[1,51] = 9.08$, $p < .0043$).

Reciprocation of Self-Disclosure

A main effect for subject sex was found on the measure of self-disclosure intimacy of written responses, $F(1,51) = 9.92$, $p < .0031$, with women disclosing more than men. A significant withdrawal effect was found for disclosure level of speakers, $F(1,51) = 9.45$, $p < .0037$. Subject self-disclosure was greater in response to low speaker self-disclosure than to high speaker self-disclosure.

Discussion

Results of this study indicate that highly self-disclosing behavior, at least in the situation sampled, is seen as generally less positive than a lower level of self-disclosure. The person engaging in such behavior is seen as less mentally healthy. There is a tendency for subjects to feel less attracted to a high disclosing individual and to feel stronger emotional reactions toward her/him. Self-disclosure of this kind is seen as negative on several dimensions and is perceived as slightly more feminine than masculine. Not all stereotypes of women exemplified by this study are negative, however. Both male and female subjects agreed that women are fairer, kinder teachers, if not more competent. Although teaching tends to be a female dominated profession, in this study women were not perceived to be more competent than men in such a role.

It is difficult to explain the finding that male subjects rated the female speaker higher on altruism than did female subjects.

Perhaps this is an effect of the Woman's movement on the college women in the sample. Assuming openness and unselfishness have been traits traditionally ascribed to women it is possible that the female subjects are rejecting this traditional notion. These subjects rated the female speaker as neutral on altruism while the male subjects rated the female speaker as moderately high in altruism (still in keeping with the traditional notion).

The present study found evidence for the withdrawal effect often expected when disclosure becomes very intimate. It is possible that the physical presence of the discloser enhances the modeling effect and elicits higher levels of self-disclosure from the listener. In the present situation at least, the power of the words alone was not adequate to elicit reciprocal self-disclosure. It is possible that the nonverbal behavior of the discloser plays a great role in both the eliciting of reciprocal self-disclosure and the attraction of the listener to the discloser. Future research should explore the effects of nonverbal behavior on self-disclosure, as recommended by Cozby (1973).

References

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Rubin, Z. Disclosing oneself to a stranger: Reciprocity and its Limits. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1975, 11, 233-260.

Sex roles and the perception of self-disclosing behavior

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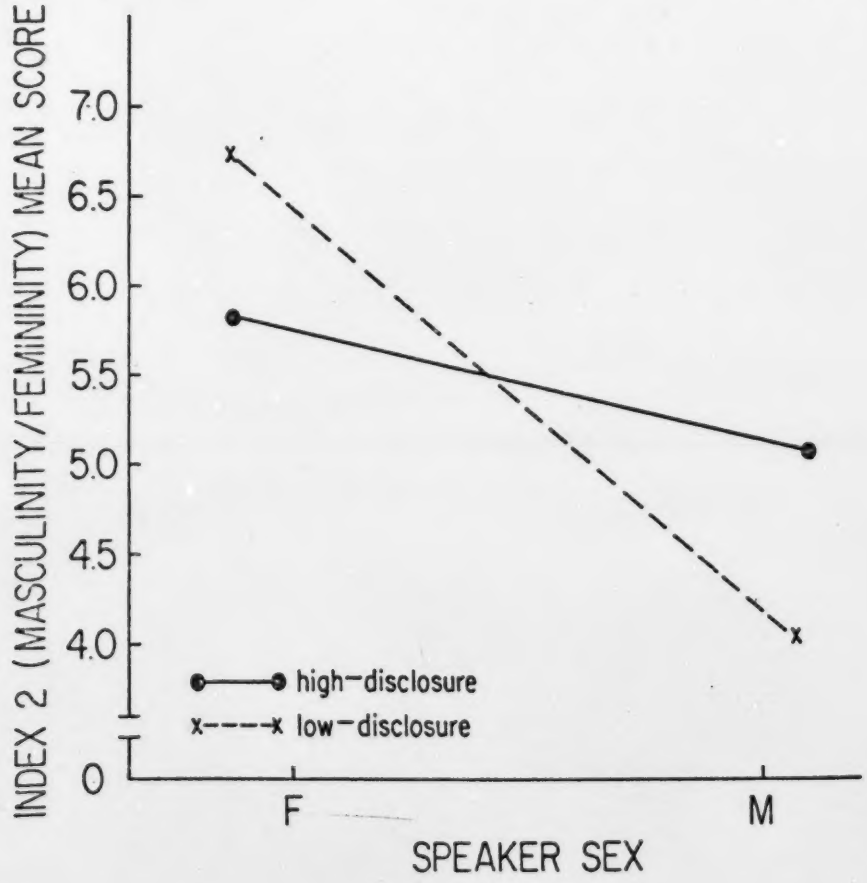

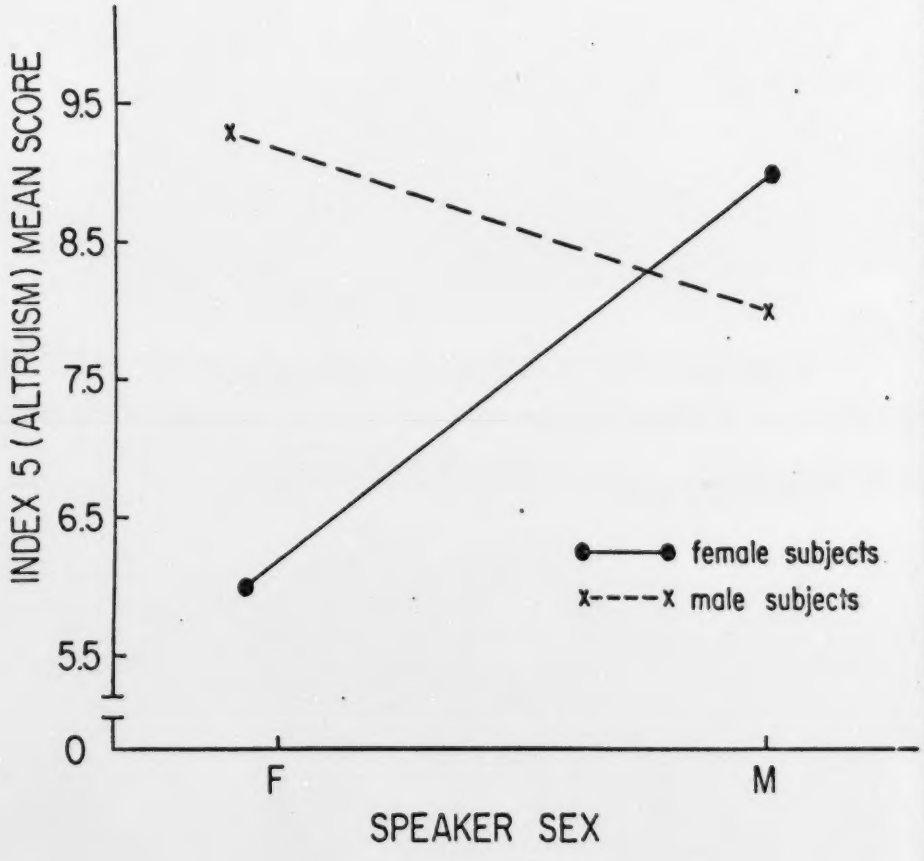

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